



A Rich Musical Heritage

By U.S. Sen. John Cornyn

There's no better way to appreciate the enormous creativity of our state than by listening to Texas music and Texas musicians. Texans love their music, and always have.

In recent times, Texas has produced originals in virtually every musical genre, from country (George Jones) to blues (Clarence "Gatemouth" Brown) to rock and roll (Roy Orbison) to jazz (Jack Teagarden) to tejana (Selena). What do classical pianist Van Cliburn, country great Willie Nelson and rock legend Janis Joplin have in common? They're all from Texas.

Our world-famous musical prominence is well-earned. Its origins go back a long way. Texas's musical roots started with Indians and the earliest missions. Among the first settlers were Germans, who brought instruments and a tradition of music appreciation to the frontier.

The Kleberg family, for instance, brought "a fine piano" with them to Texas in 1834, but it was unfortunately lost when Santa Anna burned Harrisburg, east of Houston, two years later. Music even played a role at the Battle of San Jacinto, where Texas won its freedom.

Gen. Sam Houston knew his attacking Texians would have to cross a wide open space, so he assembled a ragtag drum and bugle corps to accompany the advance. "Houston's plan on the day of battle was to deceive the Mexican sentinels into thinking that the gringo army was embarking on a sort of drill," the Houston Post reported.

"The only instruments they had were drums, fifes, bugles and cymbals, but they played right lustily as the troops went into action," wrote Lota M. Spell in her book, "Music in Texas." The ploy worked, and the Mexicans were caught largely unprepared. "Some of these musicians were later rewarded by the Republic of Texas with lands and a pension for their good work on that spring morning."

The war over, the newly liberated land returned to its music. "The Republic of Texas was a singing country," William Hogan wrote in "The Texas Republic: a Social and Economic History." The 19th century saw a proliferation of German and Czech bands, flourishing singing societies, performances in somewhat rustic "opera houses" across the state, and biennial German singing festivals.

Anyone who thinks that traditional songs have been crowded out by modern music has never been treated to the polka bands and yodeling at the annual Wurstfest in New Braunfels.

Texas also led the way in development of cowboy campfire music, and the rich mine of western folk music—songs of the people. Compositions such as "Little Old Sod Shanty" described the hard life on the Texas frontier:

"The hinges are of leather and the windows have no glass, and the board roof lets the howling blizzards in. And I hear the hungry coyote as he sneaks up through the grass, round my little old sod shanty on my claim."

These days, the Texas music legacy is more upbeat. It ranges across a rich and diverse spectrum from respected symphony orchestras in larger cities, to historic dance halls and concert venues in places like Gruene and Luckenbach, to specialized entertainment areas like Deep Ellum in Dallas. A growing extravaganza is the annual club-centered "South by Southwest Music Festival" in Austin, still known as "the live music capitol of the world."

This week, the Texas Hill Country will be alive with the sounds of music. The Kerrville Folk Festival starts again at the legendary Quiet Valley Ranch. It's been held annually since 1972 and is the oldest continuously-running music festival of its kind in North America. Some 30,000 visitors from around the world are expected.

Many major artists played Kerrville early in their careers and later. A visit to the historic Hill Country, where some of the first Texans wrote and played their music, is a great way to see a new generation of singer-songwriters who carry on the renowned Texas musical tradition.

Sen. Cornyn serves on the Armed Services, Judiciary and Budget Committees. In addition, he is Vice Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics. He serves as the top Republican on the Judiciary Committee's Immigration, Border Security and Refugees subcommittee and the Armed Services Committee's Airland subcommittee. Cornyn served previously as Texas Attorney General, Texas Supreme Court Justice and Bexar County District Judge. For Sen. Cornyn's previous Texas Times columns: www.cornyn.senate.gov/column